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Opening Statement of Chairman Jon Porter

Hearing of the House Government Reform
Subcommittee on Federal Workforce and Agency Organization

“Travel vs. Terrorism: Federal Workforce Issues in Managing Airport Security”

April 4, 2006

Thank you so much for attending the hearing this afternoon.

Although for the most part airport security is moving in the right direction, this is an area that deserves close congressional scrutiny from all relevant congressional committees to ensure that our airports continue to be safe and secure. The American public deserves nothing less. Federal employees play an integral role in airport security in a variety of ways. The hearing today will examine that role and address ways to improve upon staffing and human capital programs within DHS. In addition, I am also interested in learning more today about the foreign management of some of our airports.

Recently, the Dubai ports deal was reported by the press. People were understandably concerned that the deal would have allowed a foreign company to operate some of the country's largest seaports. Not many people know, however, that operations at some of our largest international airports are also operated by foreign firms. For example, Indianapolis International Airport is managed by BAA USA, a subsidiary of British Airports Authority PLC. BAA also manages the concessions in the passenger terminal at Pittsburgh International Airport. Terminal 4 at JFK International Airport is operated by a consortium led by a subsidiary of company based in the Netherlands. The terminals at Orlando Sanford International Airport are operated by the Spanish company Albertis. I believe that the issue of who manages and works at our airports deserves our attention. We need to know who checks the backgrounds of these companies and their employees, and we need to know how these companies and their employees are cleared to operate at our airports.

It has been almost five years since the attacks on September 11th 2001. After the attacks, we have made many positive steps forward in government organization and airport security procedures. In 2001, Congress established the Transportation Security Administration. In January 2003, 22 homeland security agencies were brought together when the Department of Homeland Security came into existence. In terms of security operations, the baggage screening process at airports has been placed under Federal control, the number of Air Marshals has been increased, and TSA Federal Security Directors have been assigned to the nation's more than 440 commercial airports to lead and coordinate TSA security activities.

Unfortunately, we still have a long way to go in terms of airport security. A quick scan of the news reports from 2006 alone provides some examples that illustrate problems within DHS's control.

- On February 27, 2006, at Will Rogers World Airport in Oklahoma City, authorities found threatening graffiti in the cargo hold of an airliner. An airport spokeswoman noted that the markings were found in a place that should only have been accessible by authorized personnel.
- On March 4, 2006, at McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas, Paula Abdul, the American Idol judge, caused a security breach when, apparently, an airport worker assisted Ms. Abdul and a companion to bypass airport security and board a flight.
- On March 6, 2006, at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York, an elderly man drove his car through two guard gates onto the tarmac, in the early hours of the morning. The driver entered an area managed by a private contractor. Eventually, he crossed at least one active runway, where an Air France jet was about to land. About 23 minutes after the incident started, Port Authority Police intercepted the man.
- That same day, at Midway International Airport in Chicago, a man ran through a gate into a secure area while the gate was opened for a vehicle. As a result, runway 4 was closed briefly. Out of the three perimeter gates at Midway, the man apparently got through the only one without a security camera. In response to this event, airport authorities said that they would retrain 222 aviation security officers and redesign the perimeter gates.
- On March 11, 2006, news reports indicated that Federal officials removed the head of security at Newark Liberty International Airport following four years of security breaches and staffing problems.
- On March 31, 2006, two baggage screeners at the Honolulu International Airport pleaded guilty to stealing thousands of dollars in yen from the luggage of Japanese tourists. According to prosecutors, the two screeners admitted to being among a group of security

screeners who stole money from the baggage of outbound international travelers and divided the cash.

Despite these reports, I believe that Federal and private security employees at airports are doing the best they can under difficult circumstances. However, we need to examine this situation from a workforce standpoint to ensure that we are doing all we can to help the people protecting our airports.

The Subcommittee will examine the hiring, background screening, training, and deployment of Federal and private sector employees working at airports. Airport security is the responsibility of the Department of Homeland Security. Two components of DHS have key missions at airports — the Transportation Security Administration and Customs and Border Protection. DHS deploys and trains an airport security workforce that includes TSA Federal Security Directors, Transportation Security Officers, known as “screeners”, and CBP inspectors. In addition to security operations, DHS sets the rules for airport and air carrier security. Specifically, DHS sets standards for airport perimeter security, access controls, and airport and air carrier security activities. Due to recent legislation, the Transportation Security Administration is working to implement an identification system for worker access at seaports and airports.

The Office of Personnel Management also plays a major role in airport security. OPM’s Federal Investigative Services Division conducts background checks of Federal employees and contractors working at airports. OPM is responsible for ensuring Federal and contract airport employees are investigated thoroughly before they are hired. OPM accomplishes this by checking job applicants against fingerprint records, national criminal databases at the FBI, and other sources to ensure that the applicants have no disqualifying factors in their background.

Airport security is of critical importance to the Nation. According to the Air Transport Association of America, in 2004 the total impact of commercial aviation on the U.S. economy was approximately \$1.2 trillion in gross output, \$380 million in personal earnings, and 11.4 million jobs. Approximately 8.8% of U.S. employment is directly or indirectly attributable to the commercial aviation sector. In my district, 44.3 million air travelers pass through McCarran International Airport each year. Most of these travelers are tourists. Tourism is by far the most important part of the Las Vegas economy. Las Vegas and the rest of the country can’t afford another disruption of air travel like we experienced after 9/11. We need to find a balance between security and the need to move air travelers efficiently through airports. Our country depends upon air transportation, and air transportation depends, in turn, on the airport security personnel. Proper management and security at airports is a matter of national security. That’s why the issues we will examine today are vital issues to be addressed by this Subcommittee.

Today, I have invited witness from GAO, TSA, OPM, and McCarran International Airport to discuss airport workforce issues. I hope that the discussion will reveal the areas that need attention and clarify the roles of all of the employees involved in airport security.

I look forward to the discussion with all of the witnesses this afternoon.

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